WINTER-FREED.

E. L. Nakman.

WINTER-FREED:

A SUMMER IDYL.

BY

EDGAR LEWIS WAKEMAN.

AUTHOR'S EDITION.

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TO

THE THOUSANDS

WHOSE HEARTS BEAT WARM AND FREE

AS THE

TALE OF THEIR YOUTH IS REPEATED,

THIS POEM IS DEDICATED,

BY

THE AUTHOR.

"Like souls that balance joy and pain,
With tears and smiles from heaven again
The maiden Spring upon the plain
Came in a sun-lit fall of rain.

In crystal vapor everywhere
Blue isles of heaven laugh'd between,
And far in forest deeps unseen
The topmost elm tree gathered green

From draughts of balmy air."

TENNYSON.

PRELUDE.

Back, through the deep'ning maze of years,
The mind of Now with one bound clears;
And scene on scene of early joy
Comes — thronging through the strange alloy
Of life; along in pictured truth
They sing the poetry of youth:
The poetry that hurts us not
To think upon and often dote:
That, in the sad, dark things that be,
Comes to us with its ministry, —
Smoothing the jutting edges — oft
Making the weary pillow soft:

Pressing down the plaids of strife,
And in each oasis of life
Inserting little streams of pure,
Bright water, always to endure;
And down whose shaded, grassy brink
The weary pilgrim bends to drink.

WINTER-FREED.

IRED, and full impatient of old
Winter's too long continued cold,
We hailed, with wild and glad delight,
The Spring appearing to our sight.
Glad the joyous summons now,
Of "Boys, down with the spade and plow!"
The winter's rest had giv'n anew
The will to work, and things to do
Were righted quickly — out we went,
Filled with the spring-time merriment.

The fields, so autumn-brown and bare,
Were ploughed again with greatest care—
Sowed seed; did all our spring's work up—
Out, where nods the violet's cup,
We drove the cows, that they might taste
Upon the beauteous prairie waste,
And nip the bright green buds, and come
At night with streaming udders home:
Then let them in the barn-yard gate,
Where fretting, weary they must wait
Till we released them of their load.
By sober winks they always showed
They loved the task of giving food;
And when the pails were filled, they stood
A moment watching as we passed,
Then down upon the ground they cast
Their pond'rous forms, and gladly pressed
Their cuds again in happy rest.

With sleeves uprolled and head all bare,
The cool wind toying with his hair,
Our father on the low porch stands
Complacent, looking on his lands,
His barns, his kine and hard-earned soil,
Or sagely planning morrow's toil.
Ah! years have brought their weary tasks,
Life has assumed its many masks,
Up through each one in sadness come
A fretted minaret and dome
Of hopes and efforts dead and gone,
And wild desire that 's with them flown!
But even now, while waiting, I,
Like some lone leaf that 's left to die,
And tempest-beaten, dun and brown,
Just stopping a little, till down
By friendly gust in turn shall fall,

And 'neath the oaks so great and tall,
Lie with the rest of withered leaves —
Lie till the great earth madly heaves; —
Can see him calmly standing now:
And round his weather-beaten brow
The dim, far distance, seems to send
A halo fair, and brightly lend
A golden radiance to the scene,
That 's pure and peaceful and serene.

Our pails within the milk-house doors
Concluded all our nightly chores.
Now, out upon the dew-tipped grass,
Before the twilight all should pass,
We rolled and scrambled merrily,
And romped in hurly-burly glee;
Standing beside our father staid,
And still, and watching as we played,

With full the knowledge (so we said)
Of grey old Grave-face, justice, 'squire,
And leader of the village choir,
Our house-dog seems to think the sport
Too tame, or something of that sort;
For down he pounces with one bound,
And strews the soft and matted ground
With bodies of our luckless horde,
As we in silent wonder heard
How Samson came from Etam's Rock,
Hearing the loud Philistines' mock,
Then burst his cords, and strewed the plain
With heaps, his jaw-boned thousand, slain.
Soon, breaking up this merry din,
And bidding each of us come in,
Our father's voice was plainly heard:
So, quick into the house we passed;
For early had we learned — and fast,

To do his bidding, at the word.

And now, within the kitchen walls,
The scene grows dim as darkness falls;
Our mother brings the lights, and sits
Musing quietly as she knits.
Mother! that name shall fondly live
Until the ready, waiting grave
Shall take me hence; and even go
To its dark caverns, deep and low,
With all the sacred love that burns
Within the pure and chastened urns
Of deep affection's holy shrine —
Well fed from Love's o'erflowing mine!
O, Time! thy guarded vigils keep;
Thy overflowing harvests reap!
On man, thy unrelenting Change,
Stamp in the stillness of thy strange

And mystic workings; thy dark, deep,
Grim orgies hold, then quickly leap
And carry out thy ripened plan —
Thy ruin to the heart of man!
Thou, who art the greatest and first
Of robbers, do thy fiercest, worst,
And sink thy barbed arrows deep;
Sear, as a leaf, man's soul; and keep
Thy joys in guarded scrutiny;
Lock thy pleasure-safes; let there be
No peace to nestle near his heart;
Steal in upon him, and apart
From Hope's glad fields, make isolate,
And quickly, then, when almost sate
Are thy rapacious jaws, lick up
The life-blood from the shattered cup!
A new found morsel for thy food —
The last and best and greatest good

Which greets thy hungered, maddened sense,
And almost makes thy heart relent —
Is — burning bright and free and pure —
Burning with love-light to endure —
Burning as stars at holy even —
Burning as angel-light in heaven —
Or radiance up there Above, —
A never-dying mother-love!

The oaken table, nicely wrought
By hands love-skilled and wisely taught
In frugal thrift and early lore,
Most practiced in the days of yore,
Was brought: all gathered quickly near,
The weekly news intent to hear:
Or, an eager party, as quite
Out of the feeble candle-light,
We pressed around our grandsire sage —

His form was bent, and certain age
Had bleached his hair a soft, pure white,
Like as the gathered frosts of night, —
To hear, in childish wonderment,
How Continental soldiers sent
From off our shores, in baffled rage,
The hireling British vassalage!
In measured cadence, still and slow,
At first he spake, and, like the low,
Sweet rippling of the meadow-stream —
Gently as talking in a dream;
Then Time's veil was slowly lifted,
As the low-hung mists are drifted,
Quick-leaving through the clear, pure air,
The mountain's side distinct and bare:
Or, as we see the silv'ry sheen
Of flashing stars, then right between
Where all seemed but the great, deep blue,

We see a wand'rer peeping through:
So he caught the far-off youth-calls;
Low at first, but as the rain falls,
In little patters, few and still,
Then faster, till they hastening fill
The air, and beat in quick and wild
Confusion — gone were his mild looks,
And the spirit that fast stirred
When of our wrongs indignant heard,
Thrilled through his service-beaten frame,
And lightly mocked destroyer Time!

Yes, quick-dropping years may fast
Fall in the calendar of Past;
They may take with them fortune, all
That serves to light the darkened halls
Of life, one legacy they leave:
Our benison they cannot cleave.

Mute it may be, yet not profound
Its sleep; for, at the slightest sound,
Its former fervor may awake,
And, like the pent-up stream, quick break
The dam, time-worn and old, and rush
Through with a wilder, fiercer gush
For its frail and feeble bindings!

Thus thronged by recollections fast,
Proud grew his form; one that had cast
With all the strength that can be giv'n
A noble cause, by righteous heaven,
A weapon, tyrant-feared and strong,
Directed to the heart of Wrong:
Mute hung an empty sleeve; fit proof
His words were true, and that aloof
From danger he had scorned to be.
That empty sleeve! how wild and free

The tale it tells! and now, when we
Can see the war-clouds give away
And breaking through the beauteous day;
Can feel our country's pulse beat on,
And throb in mutual unison, —
And hear the glad, exultant shout
A noble nation can ring out,
And see that only arm wavē free
With its twice load of liberty,
We say "proud hero!" well thou hast
Won thy laurels which will last.
That empty sleeve, which flutters, fair,
Has room to undulate in air
Made sacred, by the manly heart
That nerved that arm to do its part:
Yes, thou hast won the hallowed right
Of bearing, with thy war-dimmed sight,
A purer, dearer, fitter boon

Than monuments of costly stone:
A holy Mecca dost thou wear;
A nation's heart oft journeys there,
With glist'ning tear-drops, quick to bring
A grateful freeland's offering!

Drinking in each column's news,
Or list'ning to our father's views,
Accepting quick each slender chance
Her store of knowledge to enhance, —
Breaking the rugged, shapeless stone
In fragments, and untaught, alone
Catching gleams of precious light
From dross-wrapt gems, to make more bright
Her clouded, dream-land mysteries,
And sooner dawn upon her eyes
The life-ideal, which had wrought
Such wondrous change in word and thought,

Our sister sat, half-loved, half-feared:
She led another life than we;
And journeyed to immensity
Her ready soul, catching the gleams
Radiated from brighter beams
Of light than we might ever know.

Her eager nature craved and sought
A fairer realm to dream, where naught
Of common circumstance might come
And drive the basking spirit down
The long, steep stairs, whose each descent
Marks where other souls have rent
The charm which buoyed them up, and fell
With naught but world-gain visible.
Such life she led; but never thought
Of scorn for us, who had not caught

The deep-drawn inspiration. Nor
Felt she ever world-styled proud; for
The true spirit no stress of voice
Holds on the stations God's choice
Has meted out! and even now
Her own hand held the strained bow
  Of household duties: well she filled
  Her double mission, and distilled
Around a genial, ruddy glow.

Such hearts are needed, even now,
The growing evils to surmount,
And dash away the fatal fount
Deep-seated Fashion gushes forth,
With all its vice and sin, and dearth
Of goodly fruits, and plant right there
Far different seed, which, by good care,
Might grow and blossom, fair and full

Of all that's good and beautiful:

Blest circle! now almost complete:
But one, whose weary, wandering feet
Tread the wild paths of life, apart
From the warm, loving, household heart:
A nature impassionate and strange,
Subjected oft to sudden change;
Combining, with a heart of love,
The flash that reason cannot move;
Thus exiled by his own blind will,
Stern chiding was not best to still
His mind inflamed: like as the waves,
Which, pile on pile, leap up and lave
And beat the rocks in maudlin rage,
Need no wild, fierce winds to assuage
Their heaving swell. No one might tell
How this young heart strove brave and well

To cultivate the yielding soil
Of life; and, by severest toil,
Bring forth rich fruit, that we might view
The goodly work which he could do.

Our father, often sternly, had
The mentioning of his name forbade;
Yet, frequent was the whispered word
Which told that love yet fondly stirred
Within our bosoms, warm and true,
To him far from our eager view:
And (being like all frail ideals
That man conceives, far distance steals
The faults, and paints more bright
Good qualities brought out to light,)
We saw him as our brother yet —
As when he left us, kind as then —
His only fault too pure a view

Of honor worn by other men!

Great hearts! do not condemn unjust:
How many crafts by heaven built well
Draw anchor in a harbor wild,
To seek the ocean's broader swell,
Lest rigging, sails, and towering spars
Wreck on the white, uplooming bars;
Choosing to fight a fiercer storm,
Than while at anchor feel alarm!

Out from the bright, green fields of youth,
Basking in the sweet light of truth,
How many look across the way,
Catching a little brighter ray
From petals, seeming fairer blown!
Frail hands quick grasp the wall of stone,
And never stop those bleeding feet,

Till almost o'er the false, dark street —
Tired, and sick, and late the hour,
Find other souls have plucked the flower!

The paper's columns closely scanned,
Our father sits with head in hands.
Our mother knits on quietly;
Our sister, lost in reverie,
Journeys to that great Unknown
Whose boundless shores she feels her own!
And we, around our grandsire, all
Felt the ominous silence fall.
The clock, against the hard oak wall,
Sounded its pendulum voice in thrall;
And thus, in measured, meaning beat,
Told that "time flies," and all must meet!
Perhaps this thought found entrance, where
Fell, in light folds, our mother's hair;

And fluttered through a father's heart,
As thus he mused the world apart.

Out from the shoreless, great Unknown —
  Out from the rayless shadows, dark, —
Out from the close-drawn horizon's rim,
  Which sternly hides that wand'ring bark,
And makes all deep, dark mystery
Around their roving, banished boy,
Perhaps a gentle spirit drifts —
A tiny craft, whose sail uplifts,
Filled with a zephyr heaven-blown, —
Half-way to fondly meet its own;
And gently toy in the rich mart
Built in every parent's heart:
Perhaps they clasp that spirit-boy:
Clasp the sweet, sinless purity;
Clasp the soft artlessness, the truth,

And smiling innocence of youth.

The silence broken, now we sang
  Our evening hymn; our father's prayer
Came low and soft, and more subdued;
  As though the soul found entrance, where
Its watching angels met to bruit
The knowledge of rich, golden fruit,
Seeding and rip'ning in an hour,
Nourished by God's forgiving power.
He grasped the outstretched hand of Love;
And asked that He who rules Above,
Would watch those feet impassionate;
Would keep aloof from adverse fate;
Would guide, whatever lands they roam;
And if the rugged, jutting stone
Should bruise and tear their tender flesh,
  That He would ease their rough, dark way

Bind up their wounds, break the vile mesh
That snares, and dawn a fairer day.

Our father closed his earnest prayer;
Each silently sought our rooms, where
We might unnoticed drop a tear,—
Might ask anew that God would hear;
And feel soft peace and quietness
Steal o'er our senses, bringing rest!

Ah! little world, so full of pain,
Sometimes thy sorrows loose their reign!
Sometimes, quick through all thy sad guile,
Bursts the rich bloom, and angels smile!

And thus the farm-house stands to-night,
Resplendent in the soft, pure light;
Nestling 'neath its guardian trees,

Like fairy genii gods at ease.
How like it looks, as there it rests,
To little birds in cosy nests;
Or the freed hearts within its walls,
In shrouds of love as sweet peace falls:
The little brook, that prattled by,
Has hushed its noisy revelry:
The cooing dove, beneath the eaves,
Its tale of love till morrow leaves;
The creaking swing of the one-hinged gate
The morning winds in sighing waits,
And where some tall tree's towering crest
Breaks the bright light, aud shadows rest
Deeper — darker, with sombre cast,
Strange shapes form on the glitt'ring grass.

How sweet to view the picture now,
When thorns cling round the weary brow:

When oft the sad heart, sorrow-pressed,
Seeks, yet finds no happy rest:
How cool the balm seems to a torn,
Hurt soul, just now its worth we learn.
We turn the pages later years,
Find each one torn and wet with tears;
Back to the little ones we turn,
Leaving accounts and things more stern,
To see if ever through life's Book,
We may find the pages, which will look
Happy and peaceful, — free from pain;
Shining and pure, and without stain.
Sad, we near where the leaves grow small,
And deep and dark the shadows fall:
The light 's most out, yet we can see
Lying there, calm and peacefully,
Beautiful scenes: though faint and small,
Bright specks on life's horizon cast,

Urging us back with sweet, low call!
We grasp gems here, and flowers there;
And fill with pearls our time-thinned hair,—
Revel, and pluck of all the best;
Thus distilling beautiful rest!

The morn broke o'er us, gladly fair:
Up from the meadows, came the air
Full laden with bewitching breath,
Gleaned from the hare-bells on the heath!
Gleaned from the clover, where the flocks
Swept o'er the rich fields, giving mock
To winter's stinted, guarded fare,
Cropping the juicy herbage bare!

Now the corn-ploughing time has come;
How the leaves rustle, and talk, and hum,
Prattling their tales of autumn-wealth!

And how the little green ear, in stealth,
Peeps out through the bright, silken hair—
Peeps out and looks 'round everywhere,
Bowing and bending, to catch a glimpse
Of the fairy little lowland nymphs,
Dancing, and holding their orgies, still,
Under the shade of its spreading frill!
How, up to the bright, shining sun,
Turn its broad leaves — turn every one;
How they glitter and wave, and so
Out to the ploughing quick we go.
We are happy: we always find
Strange intelligence, almost mind,
In these little tokens of the air,
The trees, the birds, — and everywhere
Beautiful summer in rich wealth,
Bringing contentment, joy, and health!

Thus passed the time: the long week's work
Then Sabbath, blessed day of rest,
When God was worshipped — and not dress.
When that day brought sweet rest and peace,
Not glitt'ring show — voluptuous ease!
Prompt as the bells' loud, noisy beat,
We took our long accustomed seat;
List'ning, not for accents clear,
Reasoning, logic, nor to hear
The flights of florid eloquence
Of modern days; but recompense
That God will truly, surely give
To those who work, and toil, and strive;
The thirsty pilgrim nears the fount,
But does he stop the odds to count
Between the rustic cup or spring,
And goblets flashing jeweling?
And thus the thirsty, parched soul

Drank the pure waters of the Word:
Good as they came from God's own hand:
Listened, and welcome promise heard.

Again the long week ushered in
Its Monday morn: through the light, thin
Fog that laid along the rough bank
Of trees and hills, and, feasting, drank
The first bright rays of morning dawn,
Hiding from view the meadow lawn,
How many eager, watching eyes
Sought weather-omens in the skies!
And, with prescient knowledge, told
O'er the old quaint rhymes, to unfold
The secrets of the coming day.
And — when driving the mists away
With one wild foray of his bright,
Heav'n-lighted darts, and with the might

Of his kingly presence, sweeping
Down into the valleys, — creeping
Through shadowed, night-like gorge and glen,
And overturning in the fen
The night-attendants gathered there!
  Laughing to the dew-weighed flower,
Making its petals glitter fair
  With wondrous charm and magic power,
Uprose the sun — our hearts throbbed free,
With wild and glad expectancy!
For this, our long-planned gala-day,
Had promise of rare rustic glee.

Ere long, we gathered on the green,
With happy faces; not the mean
And studied smile which Art bestows
  On deep and scheming Flattery,
But the rich, warm, meaning glows

Bequeathed each Nature's devotee:

With all their trappings and their show,
Prancing horses, proud drivers, now
Swept down the merry cavalcade,—
Past gates and bars, soon to be made
Proud portals, for the golden grain
To pass triumphant! swiftly by
Farm-houses, with their marks of gain,
And rustic joy and revelry.
Sped over swiftly bounding brooks;
Saw shapes in grim and haunted nooks;
Caught the long branches drooping low
From limbs, that wildly seemed to throw
Their great, cool arms across the way,
And wish us all "a happy day"!

At last we reached our pic-nic ground;

A mossy bank, rich sloping down
To greet the ripples of the lake,
Which kiss its edge, and oft awake
Low, murmuring music, like the rise
And fall of feet in Paradise!
A little spot, low nestling down
  Between the hills, as a fear-made
Child, fearful of the shadows thrown,
  Sinks 'neath the drap'ry overlaid.
Great trees, whose branches far outswing,
And interchange grave nods, and bring
A thousand thoughts and legends told
Of wild-wood feasts, and Druids old,—
Their richest foliage gladly fling
To form a leafy covering.

Some wander through the deep old woods,—
  Climb ledges, thick with wild vines grown,

Seek dark, low caves, where echoes back
The voice, in low, sepulchral tone!
Or search some low and sandy beach;
Where the vexed waves and bright sun bleach
The smooth-worn stone, and turn them o'er,
Seeking the shells, to hear their roar,
And dream of Ocean's raging shore!
Others the loaded baskets guard,
And spread upon the velvet sward
Our sylvan feast, teeming with fare
Such as a king might wish to share.

And now announced, we hungry come,
And, seated, join the noisy hum;
Pass comments on each high-piled dish,
Accept, with rustic chivalry,
The cup of water, from the spring
That bubbles just across the way

From rustic waiting-maids; with eyes
Pure as Pleiads in the skies;
And shining curls bright as the sun —
Which struggling with the mists, has won
The mountain's top, to gild its sides —
Sends his burnished gleams, and glides
Like fairy spirits o'er lone hearts,
The foliage down — tints all its parts,
And tips the leaves with light like gold —
Accept the cup — a moment hold —
Survey the liquid, diamond-clear;
Then quaff, and swear it pearly tears,
Or nectar, from a hand more fair
Than Hebe's, whose labor was to bear
The drinking-cups to gods of myth!

And thus, in quick succession, went
Bright, joyous scenes of merriment:

With mingled jokes, and oddities
Experienced all pic-nic days;
Until the sunbeams, faint and few,
In seeming reluctance, withdrew
To swell the western sea of fire,
And watch their sun-god's slow retire:
While we, full gorged with happiness,
Longed for our homes and sleep's caress —
Glad as at morn, retraced our way.
Just as the birth and launch away
Of all fond hopes: they fade and blight,
Or, smothered in their gathered might
Of richness full — each — all that went
Return when the long day is spent,
To lay them down in some warm part,
And throbbing corner of the heart,
To find new solace for the pain,
Or rest, and gather strength again!

When next the light, grey dawn appears,
And the Eastern Shepherd, through tears
Down-weighing flower, and trees, and grass,
As barriers for his train to pass
In magisterial sway, brings
His gifts and golden offerings,
Our clustered valley homes to light —
Far as extends the peering sight,
Out past the wood-lot's long extent,
And circling round the river's bent,
And everywhere resounds again
The reapers' voices in the grain !
Yes, rich and laden harvest-time,
With gathering sheaves, and tinkling rhythm
Of sharp'ning sickles, and the drawn
  Loads, waiting at the gate-post tall
For mischief-makers springing on,

And, with their rides, delaying all.
Summer's past; and through sighing trees,
Spirits and mourning sprites, and leaves,
Of mellow brown and russet gold,
With flittings swift, dominion hold.
The high clambering ivy vine
Hugs closer to the tree, and twines
Its little tendrils around arm
And branch, to guard them from the storm.
The air is soft and dreamy still,
And gauze-like, silken fibres fill
And gleam along the autumn sky:
And, flitting slowly, shadows lie
Like shades upon a picture there
Along the valley; everywhere
Low hangs the light, dream-giving smoke;
And, as a dying man, awoke
Before the last, deep, fearful strife,

Views the trembling balance of life,
And, in the silence, utters prayer,
So, still and pulseless seems the air.

Corn-husking o'er; fruits gathered in;
The winter's wood all weather-fast:
We wait its snow-winged heralding
Prepared to meet its raging blast!

Waft, Angel of these later days!
Thy silken drift and dreamy haze:
Touch, with the magic of thy wand,
And seal more close the gathering bond
That binds us to the spirit-land!
Reach out thy soft and tender hand,
And, as the little child, which wakes
From its deep sleep, and hostage takes

Of the bright pleasures of the morn,
Still pleasures though in sadness born,
And smiles, and sinks away again,
Rememb'ring not the day's least pain,
So guide us o'er the shores which meet;
With happy visions, quick to greet
Us, coming from our youthful days
To wake, and in the deepening maze
Of dreams, to give us joy, and flame
Such lighted smiles o'er weary frames
As almost gleam from angel-eyes,
Lit with the gold of Paradise!